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AUTHOR Owens, Diane K. S.
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ABSTRACT

A study compared records of General Educational Development (GED) graduates and University of Alaska (UAA) students to assess first-semester college performance of 506 recently certified GED graduates. Data indicated that 31 percent of Anchorage-area GED graduates had enrolled at the UAA within 1 to 4 years following their GED graduation. Fifty percent of those students experienced success in their first semester. Correlations were run suggesting that significant relationships exist between college grade point average and each of three variables: GED composite scores, enrollment ages, and GED reading test scores. A comparison of frequency distributions suggested that, although the level of GED scores is not a significant factor, age is a significant factor in successful course completion. A higher proportion of older students achieved success than those students under 25 years of age. It was concluded that GED graduates can be expected to experience difficulties not limited to academic unpreparedness in their first college semester. (16 references) (Author/KC)

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First Semester College Performance of GED Graduates at the University of Alaska Anchorage

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Diane K.S. Owens
Associate Professor
University of Alaska Anchorage
Adult Learning Center

May, 1989

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Abstract

In this study a comparison of GED records and University of Alaska (UAA) student records was done to assess first semester college performance of 506 recently certified GED graduates. Data indicated that 31 percent of Anchorage area GED graduates had enrolled at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) within one to four years following their GED graduation. Fifty percent of these students experienced success in their first semester. Correlations were run which suggest significant relationships exist between college grade point average and each of three variables: GED composite scores, enrollment ages, and GED reading test scores. A comparison of frequency distributions suggested that, although the level of GED scores is not a significant factor, age is a significant factor in successful course completion. A higher proportion of older students achieved success than those students under 25 years of age. It was concluded that GED graduates can be expected to experience difficulties not limited to academic unpreparedness in their first college semester.

Introduction

The University of Alaska assumes the major responsibility for providing Alaskans a wide range of post-secondary educational programs. In addition to traditional university studies, it offers associate (two-year) degrees and is Alaska's largest vendor of adult and vocational education. The University of Alaska is an open-entry institution; no minimum academic criteria have been set to exclude students.

Since 1971, Alaska has afforded her people financial assistance for education through the Alaska Student Loan program. The loan program is available to Alaskans pursuing vocational or academic post-secondary studies. Neither high school graduation nor the equivalent, General Educational Development (GED) certification, has been required of those requesting student loans. In past years many Alaskan GED graduates and many non-high school graduates have taken advantage of the Alaska Student Loan program. Because applicants are not asked to indicate prior educational experience when applying for a state loan, information as to how many non-high school graduates and GED graduates have contracted for the Alaska Student Loan was not available (Ford, 1989).

Given the diversity of educational opportunities offered through the University of Alaska, the open admissions policy, and the readily available state loans offered Alaskan students, it was anticipated that many students entering UA programs had not graduated from traditional high school programs. Were these

non-traditional students prepared to succeed in college studies? How successful had the University been in serving these students? Certainly adult students are responsible for choices made concerning their education and finances, but many have learned hard lessons having made decisions which placed them in classes and/or course loads for which they were not prepared.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not GED high school graduates were successful when attempting University of Alaska (UAA) credit courses.

This study was not intended to suggest changes in the University's admittance policy or in Alaska's student loan program. It was anticipated, however, that information gained would aid counselors in helping GED graduates plan for initial experiences in college credit courses in order that an increased percentage of them might experience success. It may also aid the University in planning alternatives which will allow an increased percentage of non-traditional students to manage the challenge of college courses.

Review of Related Literature

GED: Predictive Success.

There have been a number of studies done comparing GED scores of college freshmen (first time students) to their grade point averages (GPA's) in order to assess the predictive value of the GED test battery. At South Plains, a two-year college in Levelland,

Texas, Wolf (1983) studied 300 GED graduates who had completed the first semester with at least nine semester hours. Findings support the GED as a valid predictor; however, correlations suggest that GED test four, The Interpretation of Literary Materials, was even more effective than the composite score for prediction. This is consistent with the knowledge that reading skills are important for college achievement. It is important to note that this study included only students who had completed at least nine credits.

Responses to a survey of GED graduate college students suggest that minimum GED scores are not a predictor of success; however, higher test scores achieved on the GED test battery (50's, 60's, and 70's on individual tests) suggest students will be better achievers in college (Swarm, 1981).

Comparison of College Success - GED:HSD.

Numerous studies from community colleges and universities around the country indicate that GED graduates who complete college programs fare as well academically as four-year high school diploma (HSD) graduates. Colert (1983) compared the achievement of 27 traditional high school graduates to 26 GED holders as measured by GPA's and the proportion of credit hours passed. The results revealed no significant difference in scores or in the ratio of hours passed to hours attempted for the two groups.

Comparing cumulative GPA's of two-year graduates at the Community College of Allegheny County, Clark (1987) found no significant difference in the academic achievement of 56 GED from that of 56 HSD students.

A recent survey of twenty-eight Florida community colleges compared the success of GED and traditional HSD graduates (Klein & Grise, 1987). Data concerning admission, enrollment, completion, and graduation indicated that GED and HSD students spent about the same amount of time in completing degree programs. The study concluded that since both traditional and GED graduates attained GPA's within the "C" range, capabilities of GED diploma graduates need not be a concern in higher education.

A study at Southeastern Community College in Whiteville, North Carolina compared the college achievement of GED graduates to that of Adult HSD graduates (Southeastern Community College diplomas). Forty-seven percent of the GED graduates had enrolled in college courses (McLawhorn, 1981). There was evidence of only a slight difference in overall post-secondary performance.

The Retention Problem.

Although a majority of the research surveyed suggests GED graduates entering college can be expected to be as academically prepared as traditional high school graduates, it is notable that these studies dealt primarily with those GED holders who had successfully completed degrees. A number of studies indicate retention of GED graduates in colleges is a serious problem. Searching records of all (over two hundred) GED holders who had enrolled at Northern Kentucky University, Rogers (1977) identified 170 who had actually completed a semester's work (12 to 18 hours). Although this completion rate is quite high, he found that whereas high school graduates averaged GPA's of 2.11, the mean

GPA for GED testees was 1.71. Sixty percent of these GED graduates were operating at a "D" level or below. Of the 170 who had completed the first semester, 81, less than 50 percent, earned two or more semesters of college work.

In a study which surveyed thirteen campuses of the University of Wisconsin, the performance of all (2,896) GED holders who entered the Wisconsin colleges in a five year period was reviewed. Figure 1 taken from this study illustrates that, although retention was a problem with all diploma holders, the problem was especially acute in respect to those certified through the GED program. Eighty-five percent of these students did not

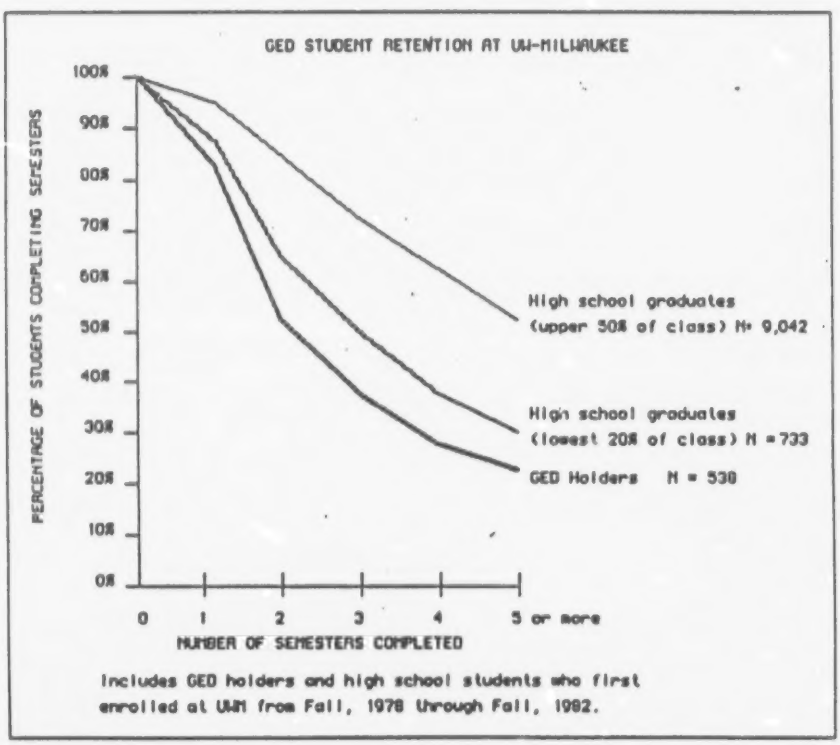

Figure 1. GED Student Retention at UW-Milwaukee

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reach their sophomore year. Thirty-five percent had no credit at all. Only four percent earned degrees within the five year period.

Although age was not found to be a significant factor for first semester success of GED holders in the Wisconsin study (Quinn, 1986), it was found to be a factor in the study done at Brandon University (Colert, 1984). From descriptive data gathered on GED holders attending this small undergraduate university in Manitoba, Canada, Colert projected that students who have higher GED scores, are over the age of 26, and take non-degree courses are more likely to be academically successful.

Readiness for College.

In a 1981 survey, questionnaires were sent to 981 GED graduates who had been admitted to two and four-year colleges in Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Florida, and California. Of the 550 who responded, seventy percent said they had achieved a GPA of "C" or better (Swarm, 1981). Students did indicate, however, problems in the area of reading and study skills. Swarm concluded that GED graduates did not appear educationally disadvantaged but felt they needed help in several areas and that counselors should have referred them to special services more often.

Quinn's research was undertaken to appraise the Wisconsin Department of Education of the success of GED graduates (1986). A part of this study focused on reading grade levels of those graduates to assess readiness for college-level work. GED holders entering UW-Milwaukee with GED composite scores below 265 and those who had been out of school for a few years were required to

take a Nelson-Denny Reading Test. Records for 301 GED holders tested in reading from 1979 through December, 1984 ranged from the test's lowest possible score (below sixth grade level) to the highest possible (15th grade level). Twenty-three percent tested below a ninth grade reading level.

At Milwaukee Area Technical College, GED holders with composite scores under 250 points were required to take a reading test to demonstrate ability to handle specific programs. The Nelson-Denny test showed that 39.2 percent of those tested were reading below the ninth grade level (Pawasarat & Quinn, 1986).

An important finding of the correlation of the Nelson-Denny reading scores at UW-Milwaukee to GED composite scores was the difference in reading scores for students who earned certification before and after January of 1978 - the date of a major GED test revision (Quinn, 1986). All those who had earned GED certification before 1978 posted reading scores of 9.3 or better. This study suggests a significant drop in the reading level necessary to pass the GED tests since 1978. Students scoring in the 12th grade range on the Nelson-Denny had an average GED composite score of 239 if they were certified prior to 1978. Those certified after 1977 who scored in the 12th grade range had an average GED composite of 263. Likewise, students reading at a 14th grade level had scored an average of 246 on the GED if tested before 1978 and an average of 275 if tested after 1977. In 1978 the GED test battery was shortened. Soon afterward, 1981, additional time was allotted on the Writing and Math tests without re-norming

the tests (Pawasarat & Quinn, 1986). It is worth noting that Rogers' (1977) study in which approximately 80 percent of freshmen GED holders had completed 12 credits was done with people who had been certified prior to the big change in the GED test battery.

Hypothesis

It was anticipated that the success rate of GED graduates attending UAA would be low, but would approximate 30-35 percent course completion evidenced in studies of community college populations. The degree completion rate was expected to be much lower, closer to the four percent noted in the University of Wisconsin study (Quinn, 1986). Because of the community college component of UAA, students enrolling here are not so likely to be working toward degrees as are those registered at UW.

Those graduates who obtained GED composite scores of 250 points or higher were expected to have done better in college courses than students with GED composite scores below 250 points. Students with higher GED scores were expected to have been better prepared academically. It was also anticipated that older students (ages 25 and older) would have exhibited a higher success rate than younger students in the sample. Older students may bring to the college setting the advantages of added maturity and purpose.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for this study were people who had obtained Alaska GED High School Equivalency Diplomas through testing at the UAA GED test center, the Adult Learning Center. GED graduates had not finished regular high school but, instead, had elected to challenge the General Educational Development Tests to obtain equivalency high school diplomas. The GED test battery consists of five tests:

Correctiveness and Effectiveness of Expression
Interpretation of Reading Material in the Social Sciences
Interpretation of Reading Material in the Natural Sciences
Interpretation of Literary Materials
General Mathematical Ability

The State of Alaska requires a minimum standard score of 35 on each test and a minimum total composite score of 225 (mean standard score of 45 or higher) for an Alaska State Equivalency High School Diploma.

A three year period was selected (January 1982 through December 1984) in order that the sample would be recent enough to assure that records would be accessible through computer search. It was also desirable that all graduates in the sample had tested under the same completion criteria. GED requirements changed after test batteries were shortened (1978) and additional testing time was allotted (1981). Using the years 1982, 1983, and 1984 allowed four years from the date of certification of the final GED graduates of the sample (December 1984 to December 1988) for these graduates to have entered the University.

Procedure

Collection of data.

A list was compiled of all the 1982-1984 GED graduates who had tested at the University of Alaska Anchorage Adult Learning Center (ALC). The following information concerning this three year period was secured through researching GED records at the ALC:

names of graduates
social security numbers
birthdates
GED test scores

Given names, social security numbers, and/or birthdates acquired from the UAA Adult Learning Center GED files, a computer search of UAA student records was done with assistance from the UAA records office. The following data was obtained from transcripts of all GED graduates in the sample who had enrolled in UAA credit courses within four years of high school completion:

1. identification of GED graduates who enrolled in college credit courses and their GPA's for the first semester and overall GPA's.
2. the GED graduates (identified above) who dropped or failed college courses.
3. identification of sample students who experienced no success in their first semester, but who, nevertheless, returned to the University within four years.
4. identification of sample students who completed degrees.

Successful completion of a college credit course was evidenced by the student having passed a class with a grade of C or better.

Because a grade of "D" is not transferable, it was not considered successful completion. A failed or dropped course was also considered an unsuccessful attempt. If the student was enrolled in more than one course and did achieve a grade of C or better in at least one class (although other courses were dropped or failed) that student was considered successful; the student had successfully completed a college class.

Data Analysis.

Computer records revealed that of the 1,965 people who completed GED diplomas between January, 1982 and December, 1984 at the UAA Adult Learning Center, 31.5%, a total of 618, had enrolled at UAA within four years of GED completion. This figure was adjusted as follows to secure a valid sample:

a. UAA students (31 people) who had successfully completed college courses *prior* to testing for the GED were dropped from the sample.

b. GED graduates (36 people) who initially enrolled at UAA later than four years after their GED graduation were dropped from the sample.

c. GED graduates (34 people) who had enrolled at UAA but whose transcripts did not reflect the courses attempted were dropped from the sample. This course title deletion occurs for two reasons: either the student has enrolled in a non-credit course, or the student has withdrawn from credit courses within three weeks of the beginning of the semester. Since there was no way of determining from the transcripts which

of the two possibilities had occured, these twenty-seven people were not considered in the adjusted sample.

d. GED graduates (11) who chose to enroll in audit or pass/fail courses *only* were dropped from the sample. There was no means of determining if auditing students had completed the course, and pass/fail grades do not influence (do not provide) grade point averages.

As shown in Figure 2, adjusting for these factors yielded a sample of 506 people newly certified as GED graduates who had enrolled in UAA credit courses as either full-time or part-time students.

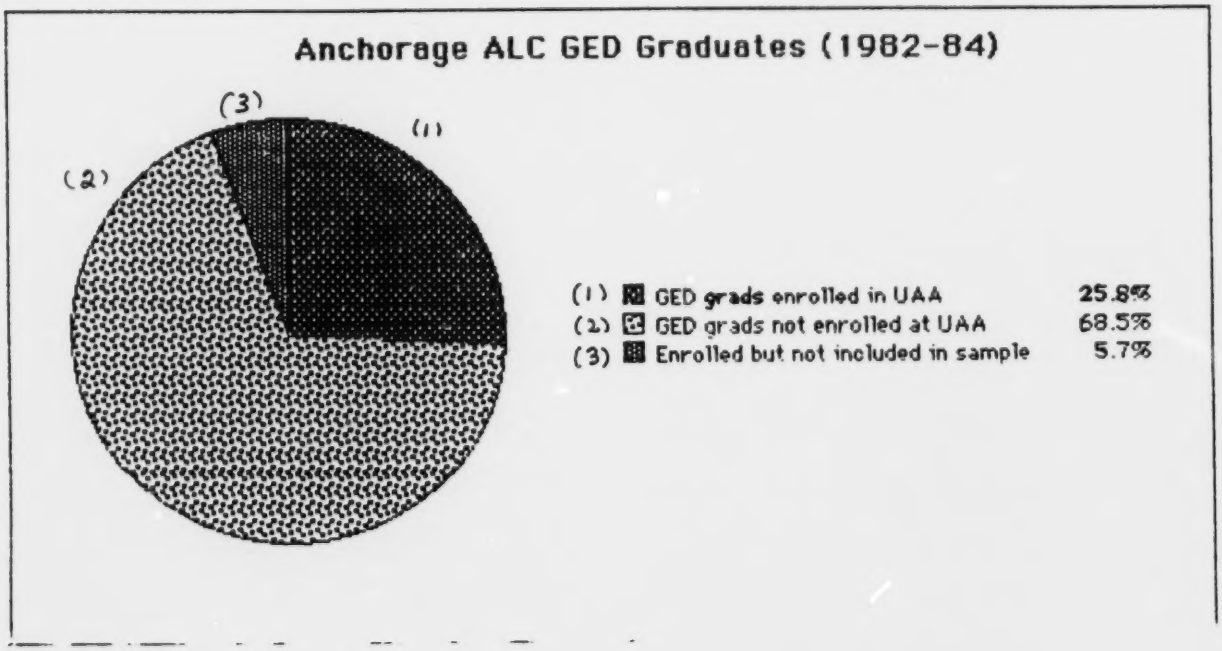

Anchorage ALC GED Graduates (1982-84)
(3)
(1)
(2)
(1) GED grads enrolled in UAA 25.8%
(2) GED grads not enrolled at UAA 68.5%
(3) Enrolled but not included in sample 5.7%

Figure 2. Percentages of the 1,965 ALC GED graduates (1982-84) who enrolled in credit courses at UAA from 1982 to 1988.

Student transcripts revealed that out of this sample of 506, approximately half had successfully completed at least one credit course in their first semester at UAA. Students who were not successful had received various grades as shown in Figure 3. The high percentage of NC's and NB's reflect grades assigned by those instructors who did not wish to penalize students who had stopped attending classes – students who essentially had dropped the courses without going through the official withdrawal process. NC (no credit) and NB (no basis for grade) did not carry quality points; therefore, they are not computed when calculating grade point averages.

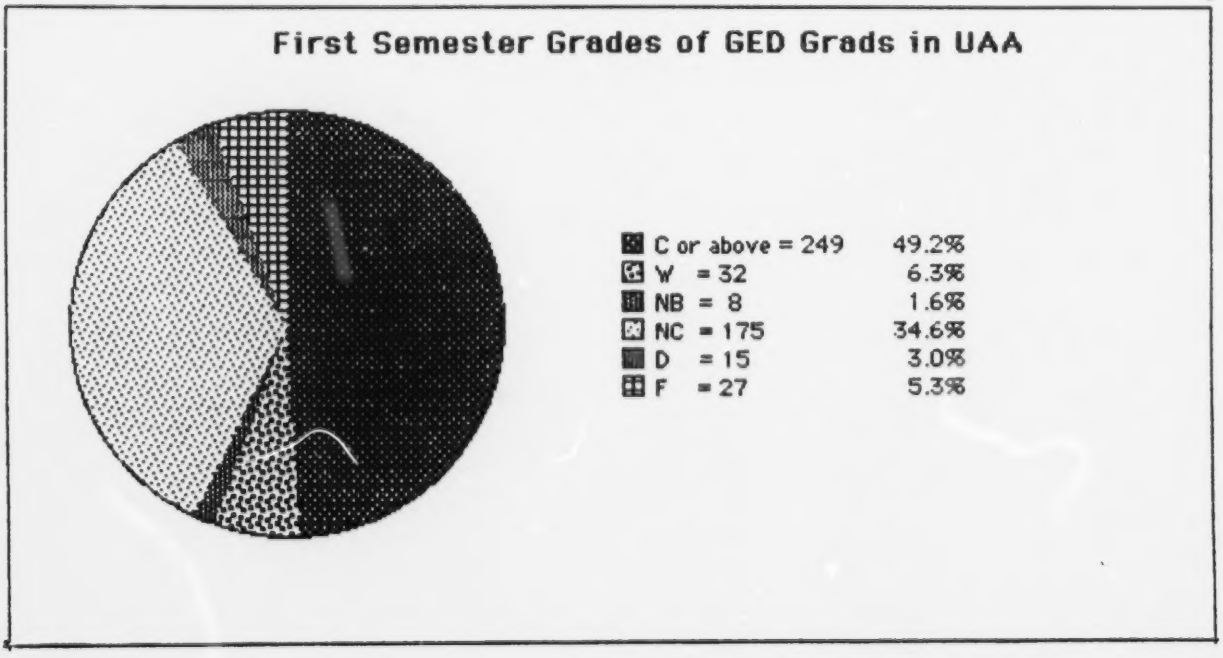


Figure 3. First semester college grades of GED graduates.

Of those 257 in the sample who did not successfully complete a course in the first semester, 87 did register again with the University within the next four years. A survey of the GPA's of the returning students indicated that 44 of the 87 did successfully complete a course in a subsequent semester. Only one of the 257 who had met with no success in the first semester went on to earn a degree.

A total of 18 people earned degrees, 3.6 percent of the total sample. Two of these were four-year degrees, 16 were two year as illustrated in Table 1. One of these students graduated Cum Laude. Four had been included on the Dean's List for at least one semester.

Table 1. Degrees earned by GED graduates at UAA.

Number	Type of Degree
1	Electronics Tech Certificate
1	Practical Nursing Certificate
3	Associate of Arts
11	Associate of Applied Science
1	Bachelor of Arts
1	Bachelor of Education
18	Total

Between January, 1982 and December, 1988, the sample of 506 GED graduates enrolled at UAA attempted a total of 11,309.4 credit hours and earned 6,286.6 credit hours, thereby showing a completion rate of 55.6 percent.

Frequency distributions for GED composite scores, ages, and GPA's for the sample were charted to assess the characteristics of each variable and are shown in Fiqures 3, 4, & 5. Tables 2, 3 & 4 which accompany each graph provide descriptive statistics on each variable (mean, minimum and maximum scores, and range).

Table 2. Descriptive Data: GED Composite Scores

X_1 : GED Composite

Mean:	Std. Dev.:	Std. Error:	Variance:	Coef. Var.:	Count:
267.034	30.931	1.375	956.706	11.583	506
Minimum:	**Maximum:**	**Range:**	**Sum:**	**Sum Squared:**	*** Missing:**
225	355	130	135119	36564449	0

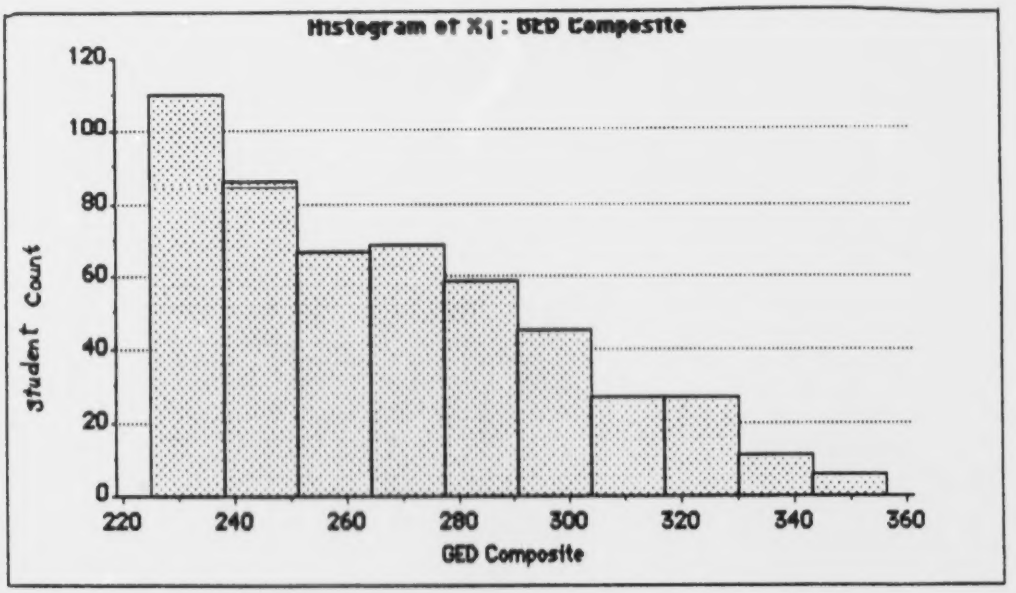


Figure 4. Frequency distribution of GED composite scores.

It is interesting to note that for each of the variables distribution

is heavily weighted to the left (positively skewed). On Figure 4 this means a concentration of GED composite scores at or near the minimum passing level. In Figure 5 the skewed distribution reflects the high numbers of young people completing GED diplomas. The GPA graph (Figure 6) is skewed due to the high count of 0 grade point averages, the majority of which are the result of students dropping out of courses.

Table 3. Descriptive data: ages of GED graduates at UAA.

X_1 : age

Mean:	Std. Dev.:	Std. Error:	Variance:	Coef. Var.:	Count:
24.478	7.695	.342	59.208	31.435	506
Minimum:	**Maximum:**	**Range:**	**Sum:**	**Sum Squared:**	**# Missing:**
16	64	48	12386	333088	0

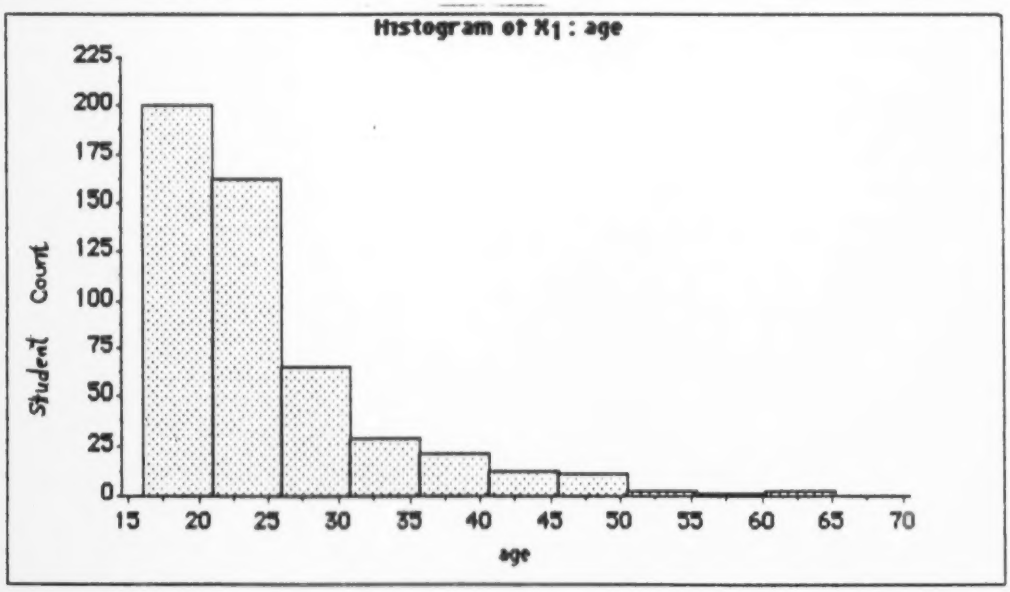


Figure 5. Frequency distribution of ages of GED graduates at UAA.

Table 4. Discriptive data: Overall UAA GPA's for GED graduates.

X_1 : GPA

Mean:	Std. Dev.:	Std. Error:	Variance:	Coef. Var.:	Count:
1.59	1.441	.064	2.076	90.644	506
Minimum:	**Maximum:**	**Range:**	**Sum:**	**Sum Squared:**	*** Missing:**
0	4	4	804.342	2327.038	0

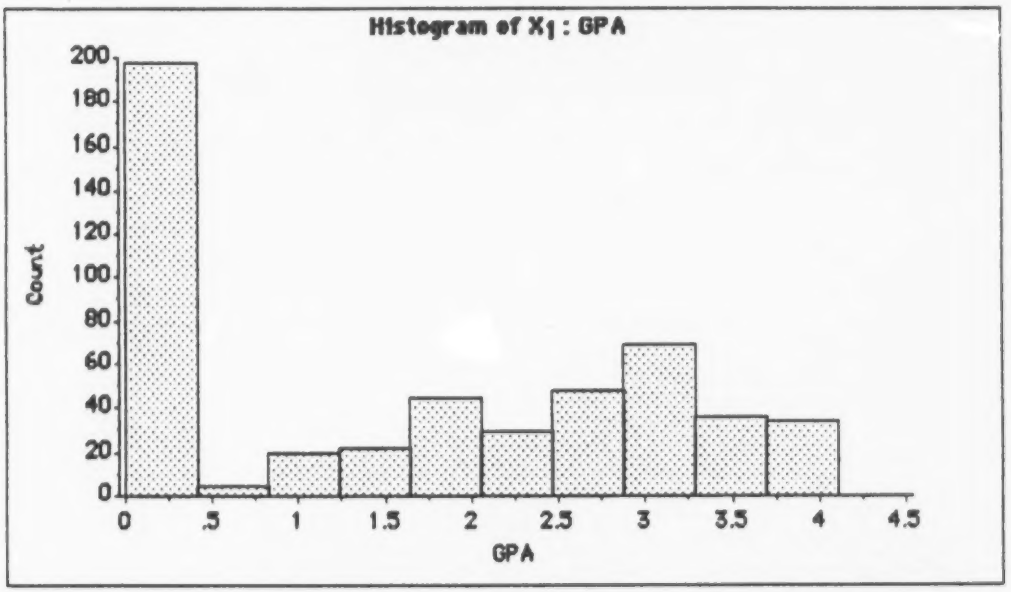


Figure 6. Frequency distribution of UAA grade point averages.

In order to assess whether a relationship existed between success in the university and GED composite scores, GED reading test scores (Test 4), or age upon enrollment into the university, each of the three variables was correlated with UAA GPA's. It was anticipated that correlation of composite scores and ages might bear on the hypothesis that UAA students who had scored above 250 on GED's or were older than 25 were more likely to succeed. Test 4 (Interpretation of Literary Materials) was used as a third

variable in view of a related study by Wolf (1983) whose findings suggested that the GED Test 4 was more effective than the GED composite score as a predictor of college success. The results of the correlations for the total sample suggest that statistically there is a significant relationship between each of the variables and college GPA. (See Table 5). Although the correlation coefficient for each of the three variables is not impressive on the scale of 0.000 to 1.000 and would not be significant for a smaller sample (a degree

Table 5. Correlations of three variables compared to UAA GPA.

Correlations of Three Variables: UAA GPA

Corr. Coeff. X_1: GED Composite Y_1: GPA

Count:	Covariance:	Correlation:	R-squared:
506	9.678	.217	.047

Corr. Coeff. X_2: Test 4 Y_1: GPA

Count:	Covariance:	Correlation:	R-squared:
506	1.826	.16	.025

Corr. Coeff. X_3: age Y_1: GPA

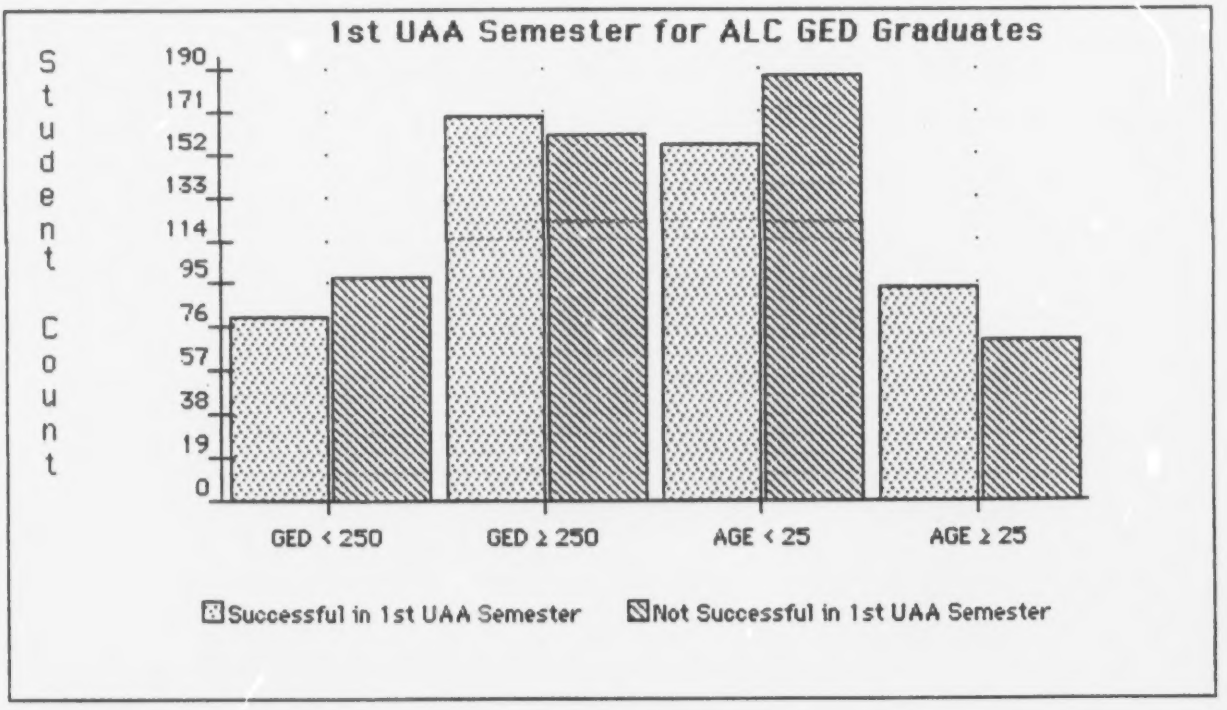
Count:	Covariance:	Correlation:	R-squared:
506	1.041	.094	.009

p = .05, df = 504, cv = .088 (Snedecor, 1967)

of freedom of 100 would require a cv = .1946 to be considered significant), a sample of 500+ allows for a cv =.088 given a probability at the .05 level. (Snedecor, 1967).

Finally, the sample was divided into successful and unsuccessful first semester attempts at credit courses by GED graduates. These groups were then compared for GED Composite scores and enrollment ages. Figure 7 illustrates greater percentages

Figure 7. First semester results as frequencies of high and low GED scores and enrollment ages above and below 25 years of age.



of those with scores above 250 did succeed in classes attempted. More students with GED scores below 250 were unsuccessful than were successful. Differences in success rates between age groups

were even more pronounced. Students age 25 and older evidence a higher success rate.

To test the hypothesis that GED scores and enrollment ages are significant factors in successful UAA course completion, a Chi Square was applied. (See Table 6). To be significant at the .05 level, X^2 (Total Chi-Square) must be greater than 3.841. Total Chi-Square equals 5.922 when frequency data on enrollment ages < and ≥ 25 are compared to successful and unsuccessful first semester attempts; there appears to be a significant relationship.

Table 6.

Age as a Factor of Success at UAA

Contingency Table Analysis

Summary Statistics

DF:	1	
Total Chi-Square:	5.922	p=.015
G Statistic:	5.935	
Contingency Coefficient:	.108	
Phi:	.108	
Chi-Square with continuity correction:	5.468	p=.0194

Observed Frequency Table

	< 25 yrs.	≥ 25 yrs.	Totals:
Success 1st Semester	156	93	249
No Success 1st Semester	187	70	257
Totals:	343	163	506

Although the earlier correlation indicated GED scores are significantly related to university GPA's, a Chi Square comparing GED composite scores <250 and ≥ 250 to the successful course completion total indicated no significant relationship with university success exists at the .05 probability level. (See Table 7).

Table 7. Distribution of GED composite scores <250 and ≥ 250 compared to first semester success at UAA.

Distribution of GED Scores < 250 & ≥ 250

Contingency Table Analysis

Summary Statistics

DF:	1	
Total Chi-Square:	1.733	p=.1855
G Statistic:	1.735	
Contingency Coefficient:	.059	
Phi:	.059	
Chi-Square with continuity correction:	1.515	p=.2184

Observed Frequency Table

	< 250	≥ 250	Totals:
Success in 1st Semester	80	169	249
No Success in 1st Sem.	97	160	257
Totals:	177	329	506

Discussion

The results of this study support the hypothesis that the success rate of GED graduates attending UAA would be low, however the first semester success rate of 49 percent exceeded the 30-35 percent anticipated. It was found that age is a significant factor for first semester success, thus supporting the findings of Colert at Brandon University (1984). The second factor, that of GED scores above or below a 250 composite, did not prove to be a significant factor for first semester success for these students enrolled at UAA.

The results of correlations with the variables of GED scores, ages, and GED reading test scores which found them to be significantly related to overall grade point averages and thus, consistent with the findings of Wolf (1983).

It is apparent from this study that GED graduates, though they may be academically prepared for college courses, can be expected to experience difficulties in their first semester. Even many of those defined in this study as successful (because they had completed at least one credit course with a grade of C or above) failed or dropped other courses. Failure in this first semester (a very important semester for many students since ideas and expectations concerning college and their ability to handle it can be shaped by this first experience) was enough to deter 49% of the sample from re-enrolling. Only eight who had received an F in a first semester attempt found the courage to reenroll at UAA. Four of these would eventually pass a course.

The GED has gained in popularity in recent years, offering an opportunity for an instant diploma to many young people. Perhaps GED graduates are unwilling to commit to so lengthy a time period as fifteen-week semesters present. Whether the 50 percent drop rate evidenced by GED graduates at UAA is particularly high when compared to the drop rate of regular high school graduates has not been determined. Such a comparison would be desirable. It would be interesting to compare the overall credit hour completion rate of 55.6 percent with that evidenced by regular high school graduates enrolled at UAA as well.

No doubt there are factors which promote college success other than academic achievement. This study did not allow for assessment of factors such as motivation, intellectual level, self-concept, peer or family emotional support, study skills, or time management skills. All of these may bear on the college success of the GED graduate. Perhaps more courses need be offered which would help the student deal with them.

It is accepted that "college is not for everyone." However, the University of Alaska has extended its mission to include not only four year degree and graduate students, but also the less traditional college students formerly served by the community colleges. Two year degree students, students seeking vocational certification, students who are experimenting to find direction, non-degree students seeking skills training . . . these too are the charge of the university. Steps must be undertaken to better meet the needs of these students.

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